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ABSTRACT

A critical national problem facing the United States is the steady decline in voting of the citizenry. Surveys of the 44 largest public school systems from across the country and of 100 corporations from the Fortune 500 group as well as individual interviews and roundtable discussions with teachers, executives, members of Congress, local and state election officials, and community organizers provided the material for this study. It would seem that while there is a range of causes for the decline of voting since 1960, the single largest obstacle to participation is the two-step system of voter registration. Unlike all other western democracies, the United States requires citizens to register several weeks before they vote, rather than on election day. Studies show that once citizens are registered, the overwhelming majority vote in presidential elections. But same-day registration would not solve the whole problem. Among the changes in U.S. society in recent decades has been a lessening of the impact of mediating institutions--unions, local political party organizations, and other institutions that have traditionally assisted citizens by helping them to register, providing information about the candidates, and encouraging them to vote on election day. This study examines the potential role of three types of institutions--schools, businesses, and community-based activist groups--and makes recommendations concerning how each might help turn around the voter decline. (JB)

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The Vanishing Voter and the Crisis in American Democracy

The Vanishing Voter and the Crisis in American Democracy

New Strategies for Reversing
the Decline in Voter Participation

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People For the American Way

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study, part of People For the American Way's Voter/Citizen Participation Project, proposes several important strategies for solving a critical national problem: the steady decline in voting in America. The Project, supported by grants from the Carnegie, Ford, George Gund, and Joyce Mertz-Gilmore Foundations, seeks to increase public discussion and understanding of the importance of citizen participation, with a special emphasis on voting in this election year.

The study is the product of original research by People For the American Way, as well as an examination of the considerable body of literature on voting behavior. An important focus was non-voting among young people. The primary research included:

- In-depth focus groups, conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., with a cross-section of 18- to 24-year-old non-voters.
- A survey of the 44 largest public school systems as well as interviews with teachers and high-school administrators from around the country.
- A survey of the voter registration efforts of the top 100 corporations of the Fortune 500. The survey questionnaire focused on voter registration, voter education, and get-out-the-vote activities, the key elements of a nonpartisan program.
- Roundtable discussions on the decline of voting with some 50 corporate executives in Los Angeles, Cleveland, and Minneapolis.
- Interviews and discussions with Members of Congress and their staffs, local and state election officials, and community organizers and other activists who are currently engaged in voter registration and participation programs.

There are a range of causes for the decline of voting since 1960, including the influence of television, the seeming intractability of many current public policy problems, and the high cost of political campaigns. Likewise, reversing the trend will require a multi-faceted effort.

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Any discussion of efforts to improve voter participation must begin with the recognition that the single largest obstacle to participation is the two-step system of voter registration in America. Unlike all other western democracies, the United States requires citizens to perform two acts before their vote is counted: first they must register, then they must vote. In most of the 50 states, the two steps must be taken several weeks apart, because of early registration closings. Studies show that once Americans clear that barrier--once they are registered--the overwhelming majority vote in presidential elections. The most important reform, and one that could be implemented quickly and easily, is a federal same-day registration law that will allow citizens to register when they go to the polls to vote.

But even same-day registration would not solve all the problems facing our democratic system. Among the changes in our society in recent decades has been a lessening of the impact of mediating institutions--unions, local political party organizations, and other institutions that have traditionally assisted citizens in navigating the waters of American politics by helping them to register, providing information about the candidates, and encouraging them to vote on election day.

The study examined the potential role of three types of institutions that might serve as the mediating institutions of the 1990s and the 21st century: schools, businesses, and community-based activist groups.

Following are the findings and recommendations of the study:

Schools

- Most school systems do little or nothing to help register their students. A few, however, have managed to register eligible voters through creative, low-cost programs. Successful programs, such as one conducted by the Dade County, Florida high schools, should be adopted across the country.
- High-school voter registration must be part of a broader effort to stimulate student interest in citizen participation. This should include texts and classroom instruction that emphasize participation, as well as providing students opportunities for community service experience.
- Voter registration efforts should go beyond traditional college-track high-school students. Special programs to reach disadvantaged youth, particularly dropouts, should be developed. One approach is to make voter registration and education part of the curriculum at youth-employment training centers. People For the American Way recently developed a curriculum to help accomplish that goal.

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Businesses

- American businesses--both large and small--affect the lives of millions of citizens. They can and should play a significant role in addressing voter-participation problems. But while some major American corporations have instituted nonpartisan voter-participation programs geared to their employees, customers, or the community at large, the majority has made only a limited effort, or none at all.
- Nevertheless, there is interest and untapped potential in the business community for new, expanded efforts to reach a broad segment of the community.

Community-based Activist Groups

- Voter-registration and education efforts by community-based groups, such as the "Sign Up ... Take Charge" campaign now operating in communities in California, Texas, and New York, should be given much more attention. Such groups are ideally situated to place voting in the context of broader citizen participation.
- Community-based groups should receive more financial support from public and private sources for their voter-registration/education efforts.

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BACKGROUND

A generation-and-a-half ago, the educator and philosopher Robert Maynard Hutchins wrote that, "The death of democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment." His words are particularly apt in an era of declining voter participation.

As the November election approaches, there is growing concern that voter turnout may reach an all-time low. Only 53.1 percent of eligible voters went to the polls in 1984, and the 80 million stay-at-homes exceeded Ronald Reagan's vote total by more than 20 million. According to a study in the July *National Journal*, nearly 14 million new voters needed to be registered in the final months before the election just to match the registration level of 1984.

These grim statistics are part of a long-standing decline in voting. Since 1960, voter turnout has dropped by nearly 20 percent in presidential elections. The trend in midterm, congressional elections is also down: in 1986, voter turnout decreased by 10 percent compared to 1982 and, outside of the Deep South, the turnout of eligible voters was the lowest in American history. (Figure 1)

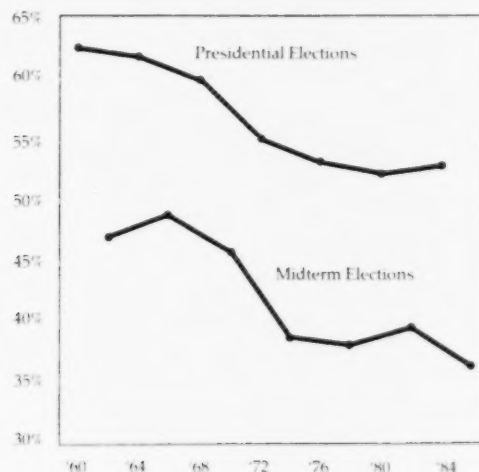


Figure 1: Voter Turnout as Percentage of Voting Age Population, 1960-1986
Source: USA Votes

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The statistics on young voters are even worse. In 1972, when 18-year-olds were first eligible to vote, there was widespread anticipation that youthful idealism would infuse the electoral process with a growing number of new, energetic participants. Instead, with few exceptions, in each succeeding election the percentage of 18- to 24-year-olds who vote has declined. (Figure 2)

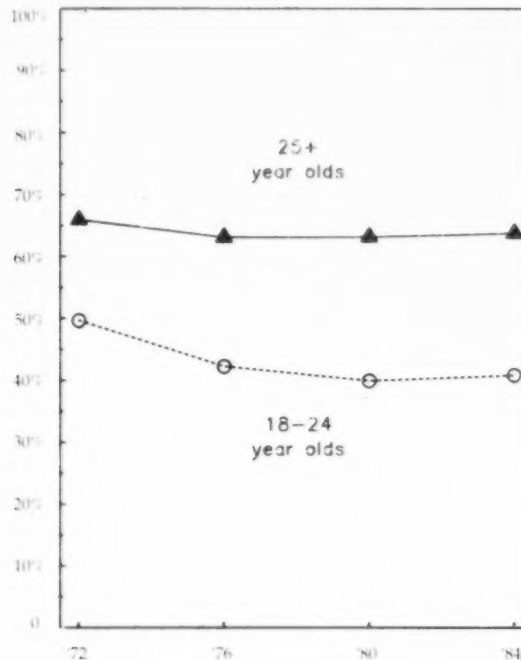


Figure 2: Turnout of 18- to 24-year-old Voters in Presidential Year Elections, 1972-1984
Source: U.S. Census

Recent election statistics are especially troubling. In 1980, 58 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds did not vote, and in 1984, 57 percent stayed away from the polls. In midterm elections the turnout rate among young people is even worse, hitting an all-time low in 1986 when only 16.7 percent went to the polls.

In a democracy, when non-participation "wins" election after election, it should be a red warning light. To be sure, voting is only one responsibility of citizenship, but it is the most basic. "It is the first duty of democracy," as President Lyndon Johnson said during the struggle for voting rights legislation a generation ago.

Citizens who don't vote are not likely to be involved in other aspects of democratic life --they are not likely to be participants at school board meetings in their towns and cities, or to engage in public discussion and decision-making about housing for the elderly, or

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mental health programs, or environmental policies and budget priorities, the myriad of issues that comprises the fabric of community life. Indeed, it is all too common that the lowest voter turnouts of all occur in local elections. Even a champion of American democracy like Alexis de Tocqueville gravely warned 150 years ago that unless individual citizens were regularly involved in governing themselves, self-government would gradually pass from the scene.

Missing: A Sense of Urgency

The picture that emerges from People For the American Way's research is something of a paradox. On the one hand, there is widespread agreement that the long-term voting decline is hazardous to the health of American democracy. Few people are comfortable with the fact that the United States--the world's oldest continuing democracy--now ranks last among its democratic counterparts in voter participation. And there is a broad concern that we are moving closer to "a government of half the people, by half the people, and for half the people," in the provocative words of a newspaper ad sponsored by a major American corporation--a government increasingly dominated by special interests and a democracy diminished in both legitimacy and vitality.

Yet the picture also reveals little sense of urgency for addressing the problem. To be sure, there are notable exceptions, and some of these can serve as models for future action. But overall the evidence suggests that not nearly enough has been, or is being, done. For example, until recent stirrings in Congress, there had not been a major push for federal voter-registration reform legislation since the last attempt failed more than a decade ago, even though many experts agree that reforming the current system would increase voter turnout significantly.

At the state and local level, while there have been some encouraging new developments such as mail-in registration, too many states with abysmal voter-participation rates have carried on with "business-as-usual" procedures. In spite of the bleak voting rates among young people, for the most part schools have not developed new initiatives to inspire voting and to demonstrate that the adult world values such participation.

The Mystery of the Vanishing Voter

An analysis of the substantial body of current literature on the decline in voting reveals little consensus on the causes. Indeed, there is an element of mystery to the disappearance of the American voter. Participation has been on the wane during a period when some historic barriers to voting have been lowered or removed through court decisions or legislation such as the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

When voter turnout continued to decline in the 1970s, however, there was speculation that disillusionment with politics and government policies associated with the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the economy had soured people on the electoral process. But in

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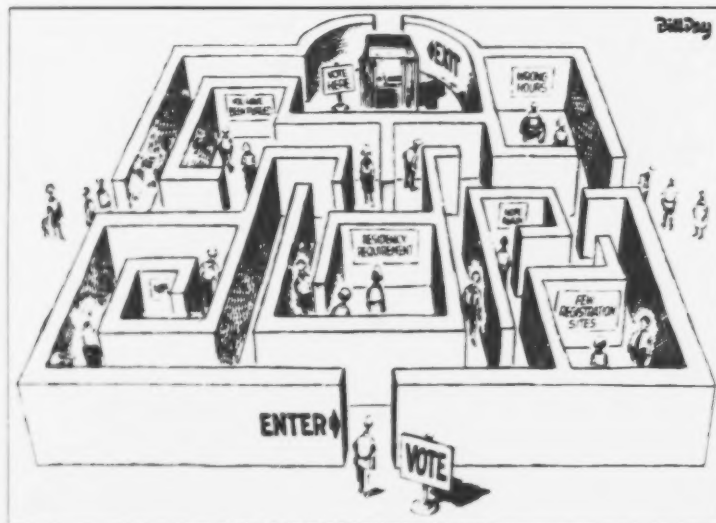
the relatively tranquil 1980s, participation has continued to drop, prompting a recent newspaper editorial to theorize that perhaps both "angry alienation and soggy satisfaction" contribute to non-participation.

Other critics have suggested the pervasive influence of television has turned the nation into passive spectators--or that seemingly intractable problems such as federal budget deficits have fueled feelings of despair, apathy, and indifference. Some point to the growing tendency of campaigns to target their resources on media instead of voter registration and get-out-the-vote. There are those who fault the increasingly high cost of political campaigns and the reliance on special interest political-action committees for funding--PAC expenditures have soared from \$16.5 million in 1972 to \$130.3 million in 1986. As candidates for Congress become increasingly dependent on PAC contributions, critics charge, their campaign messages and legislative priorities are shaped accordingly, one result being that would-be, lower income voters in particular hear little from candidates that relates to their concerns and, consequently, see little reason to vote. In his book *The New Politics of Inequality*, Thomas Edsall argues that lower income citizens are increasingly under-represented in the electorate.

Doubtless, all of the factors cited above have contributed to the decline in voting, and the existence of multiple causes means that no single solution will solve the problem overnight. However, two factors are especially important: the cumbersome voter registration system unique to the United States, and the lack of commitment to resolving the problem displayed by the institutions in American society best positioned to help citizens participate.

THE TWO-STEP VOTING PROCESS

In 1984, nearly 60 million Americans--approximately one-third of the voting age population--were not registered to vote. The United States' voting system differs from other democracies in one critical respect: in the United States, registration requirements make voting a two-step process while in other democracies the government is essentially responsible for establishing a voting list--in effect, ensuring that all citizens are eligible to vote on election day. The two-step election system has its roots in restrictive state laws that were ushered in toward the close of the 19th century when voter participation was at its peak. It was claimed such laws were necessary to prevent vote fraud, but in fact they were also aimed at denying the vote to blacks and immigrants. The two-step system still acts as a barrier to voting today.



Our unique system is actually a patchwork of 50 differing systems, because the individual states shape and control much of the election process. (Figure 3) Registration requirements, for example, vary widely--some states allow registration by mail while

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	Mail-in Registration	Agency-based (statewide)	Deputy Registrars	Election day Registration	No Registration
Alabama			X		
Alaska	X		X		
Arizona		X	X		
Arkansas			X		
California	X		X		
Colorado		X			
Connecticut	X	X	X		
Delaware	X				
District of Columbia	X				
Florida			X		
Georgia			X		
Hawaii	X		X		
Idaho			X		
Illinois			X		
Indiana			X		
Iowa	X	X	X		
Kansas	X		X		
Kentucky	X				
Louisiana					
Maine	X		X	X	
Maryland	X	X	X		
Massachusetts			X		
Michigan		X	X		
Minnesota	X	X		X	
Mississippi			X		
Missouri			X		

Figure 3: Voter Registration by State

others do not; some end registration as long as 50 days before an election while a few provide for registration up to and including election day; only one state, North Dakota, has no registration requirement. State-to-state differences also exist in other important areas such as in the use of door-to-door canvassing by election officials to facilitate registration, the deployment of volunteers as deputy registrars, residency requirements, and the criteria for purging registration lists of voters who are no longer eligible.

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	Mail-in Registration	Agency-based (statewide)	Deputy Registrars	Election day Registration	No Registration
Montana	X	X	X		
Nebraska	X		X		
Nevada		X	X		
New Hampshire*					
New Jersey	X				
New Mexico			X		
New York	X	X			
North Carolina			X		
North Dakota					X
Ohio	X	X	X		
Oklahoma		X	X		
Oregon	X	X			
Pennsylvania	X				
Rhode Island			X		
South Carolina	X		X		
South Dakota	X				
Tennessee	X		X		
Texas	X	X	X		
Utah	X				
Vermont		X			
Virginia			X		
Washington		X	X		
West Virginia	X		X		
Wisconsin	X		X	X	
Wyoming*					

* In-person Registration Only

Sources: Secretaries of State, Human SERVE, League of Women Voters

The Citizens' Commission on Civil Rights, chaired by Arthur S. Flemming, recently conducted a nationwide investigation of current voting practices. It reported that "substantial barriers to registration and voting continue to exist in many parts of the country." The Citizens' Commission heard testimony from numerous sources about often subtle practices and procedures to discourage voter registration and participation, especially among minorities:

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- In Mississippi, still a heavily rural state, election officials refused to deputize representatives of a black group who planned to register black families living 20 to 30 miles away from the nearest town or county courthouse, and for whom travel was difficult.
- Hispanic voters are frequently the targets of intimidation by election officials who subject "Hispanic-looking" registrants to more rigorous identification checks. The Commission heard accounts of such practices in New York, Texas, California, and other states.
- Witnesses representing Native American tribes testified that formidable language and logistical barriers discourage voter participation in the United States electoral system, even though participation levels are often high in tribal elections.

In addition to such discriminatory practices, People For the American Way found clear evidence that two-step registration places special burdens on first-time voters. For example, the non-voting-youth focus groups conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc. demonstrated that for the participants "the self-registration system we practice in this country creates a real obstacle to first-time voters ... the maze of rules, regulations, times, and places for registering can be an intimidating deterrent...."

Participants pointed out that by the time a political campaign gets their attention the registration deadline may have passed. As one 19-year-old put it, "I got real interested in the campaign for mayor last year, but by the time I did, they told me it was too late to even register."

Recommendations

Easing the complicated system of voter registration should be a top priority. Once registered, Americans actually vote—at least in presidential year elections—at about the same rates as citizens in other democracies. In fact, Census Bureau statistics and other sources reveal that more than 80 percent of those registered went to the polls from 1972 to 1984. (Figure 4)

In addition, while it is true that the more educated segments of the population vote in higher percentages than their less educated counterparts, the difference narrows significantly when the less educated are registered to vote. For example, among all eligible voters in 1984, 79.1 percent of the more educated voted while only 42.9 percent of the less educated did so, a difference of 36 points. But, when the comparison is made between registered voters, the gap is considerably less—in 1984, 94.4 percent of the more educated voted compared to 80.3 percent of the less educated.

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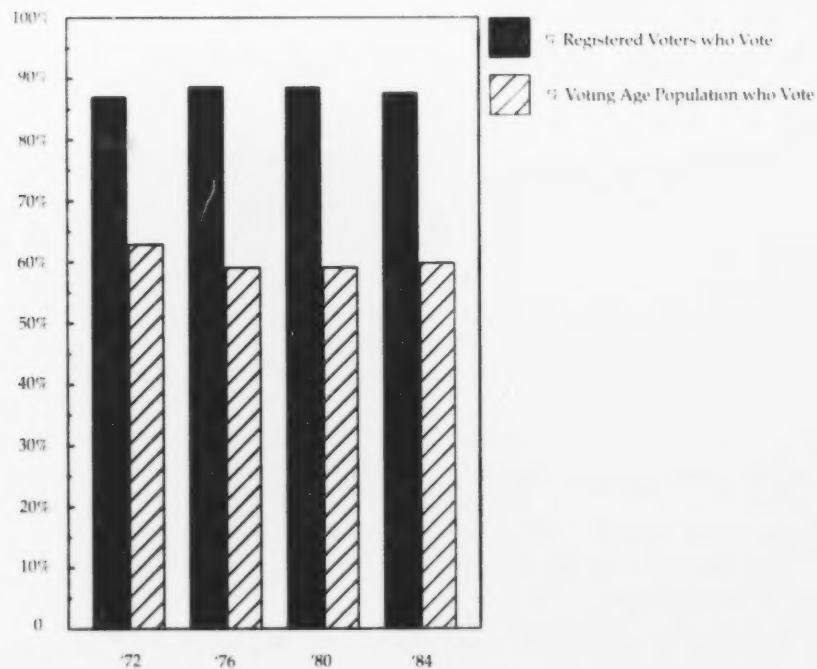


Figure 4: Turnout of Registered Voters Compared to the Entire Voting Age Population in Presidential Elections, 1972-1984
Source: U.S. Census

Similar findings have been reported concerning minorities, whose overall voting participation continues to lag behind the national average because of discrimination and other factors. In 1980, for example, more than 84 percent of registered blacks and 83 percent of registered Hispanics went to the polls, a turnout rate that was roughly equivalent to the national average for all registered voters. In 1984, post-election surveys of newly registered voters, many from low-income neighborhoods, revealed a turnout rate only slightly less than the national average.

Likewise, as with other segments of the population, once youth are registered, they tend to vote at almost the same rate as other groups in presidential elections. In midterm elections, however, their voting rate drops to levels of 40 to 50 percent, compared to more than 70 percent of registered voters of other age groups.

People For the American Way recommends the following steps:

- Congress should adopt legislation to require election-day registration for all federal elections.

Three states--Maine, Minnesota, and Wisconsin--already have such a system and another, North Dakota, requires no registration prior to voting. All of these states rank

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at or near the top in voter turnout. The evidence is that "same-day" registration is workable and that safeguards can be established to guard against multiple voting or related types of vote fraud.

- **Congress should adopt legislation to require mail-in registration for all federal elections.**

Currently, 25 states and the District of Columbia permit registration by mail. Thus far, it appears that mail-in registration can be effective if election officials aggressively publicize its use and make the mail-in forms readily available. For example, earlier this year in Minnesota, more than 80,000 state residents returned a completed mail-in registration form that was sent out with state income tax forms.

- **Congress should adopt legislation to require agency-based registration for all federal elections.**

Registration materials should be made available at both private and government agencies such as motor-vehicle, employment, social security, health and welfare offices. The most effective agency-based programs are those in which staff take the initiative, rather than relying on citizens to request registration materials. In Michigan, which pioneered the "Motor Voter" concept, there were more than 770,000 transactions (both new registrations and address changes) in 1984 alone.

Legislation is currently before Congress to accomplish all three of these goals. It is supported by a broad coalition of more than 150 organizations. Until such legislation is enacted, the states should act to implement these programs on their own initiative.

MEDIATING INSTITUTIONS FOR THE 1990s

In the absence of legislative reforms, other programs are needed. Among the changes in our society in recent decades has been a lessening of the impact of mediating institutions—unions, local political party organizations, and other institutions that have traditionally encouraged participation by helping citizens to register, furnishing information about the candidates, and encouraging citizens to vote on election day. Although the decline of these institutions has been well documented, the phenomenon's impact on the voting problem has not been fully explored.

People For the American Way's study examined the potential role of three types of institutions that might serve as the mediating institutions of the 1990s and the 21st century: schools, businesses, and community-based activist groups.

Schools--An Untapped Resource

The participants in the youth focus groups conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates for People For the American Way revealed a high degree of apathy. That apathy appeared to be related to a lack of understanding of democratic and governmental processes.

For example, while a number of these young people expressed their concern—even anger—about such problems as the plight of “homeless people walking the street,” “kids selling drugs,” and “the sexual abuse of children in day-care centers,” these non-voters “do not see a connection between these issues and government policies—either as causes or solutions,” Peter Hart observed. “And they do not see political participation as a way to address the problems.” Moreover, most of the participants had a very negative, cartoon-like image of politicians that reinforced their inclination to remain uninvolved—words like “dishonest,” “corrupt,” and “liars” were commonly used descriptions.

Typically, when asked if they are good citizens, the participants reported that they are because they “don’t do anything wrong,” or “don’t do anything to hurt anybody else.” Rarely, however, did they articulate a more active, broader concept of citizenship.

The continuing decline in voter participation takes on a chicken-and-egg quality. As fewer young people vote, political candidates are less interested in expending resources,

encouraging them to register or addressing issues they care about. And as the political process becomes increasingly distant and irrelevant to young would-be voters, ever more drop out or avoid involvement in the first place. Active high-school voter registration and education could help create a new critical mass of young voters whose concerns parties and candidates could ignore only at their own peril.

Failing Our Children

It is all too clear that the adult world has not provided these young people with the background or appreciation of what it is to be a citizen in a democracy. The vast majority of the focus-group participants recall few family dinner-table conversations about politics, and more than a few were incredulous that anybody would actually watch a presidential address on television. "I don't think there are too many people in the United States, anywhere, that watch-actually sit there and watch the President," one participant said. And another volunteered: "I don't know about anybody else, but when the President comes on TV, we turn the TV off."

If parents of these non-voters did not provide models or inspire interest in active citizenship, neither apparently did the institutions with which they came in contact, especially their schools. When asked which subjects they liked best and least in school, these young adults characterized social studies courses as "dull" with disheartening frequency. "I guess they tried to teach you the formation of the government and how it was laid out," one participant said. "But, man, it was boring."

These responses were consistent with the findings of civics textbook reviews issued by People For the American Way last year. The study, a review by a panel of experts of the civics and government textbooks most used in public schools, found the books bland and uninspiring, sacrificing in-depth analysis of important subjects for superficial treatment of a wide range of topics. The books failed to highlight the critical role of citizen participation in a democracy and to dramatize the controversy and conflict at the heart of American politics. In short, the books failed to attract students' interest, much less their participation.

Interestingly, a significant number of these non-voters think that the schools should play a more affirmative role when it comes to teaching the importance of voting. One focus-group participant said: "I'd go into the schools and I'd tell the kids how important it was that they need to vote, and try to get them actively involved. When I went to school, they didn't do that." And another participant endorsed the idea of role playing or participatory instruction. "We had an actual vote," one recalled about a social studies class. "I don't remember what they did, but I remember it was really interesting at the time." One youth said, "The class itself became congressmen, and president, vice president; and we read through bills and stuff. Just the whole system was a lot more interesting, to see it actually work."

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The suggestion by focus-group participants that schools should play an important role is consistent with a key finding of a recent study on youth and the electoral system. Released last year, the three-year study involved 2,075 high school seniors in 60 high schools in four Ohio counties, and was sponsored by the League of Women Voters of Cleveland; Ohio Secretary of State Sherrod Brown; and the Ohio Department of Education. The study concluded that high-school teachers--not mass media, campaign literature, or peers--were the most likely to be effective in promoting registration among uninterested or reluctant 18-year-olds.

Survey of Major School Systems

To explore the role schools could play in reversing the decline in youth voting, People For the American Way conducted a survey of the public school systems that comprise the Council of the Great City Schools, the 44 largest public school systems in the country. Thirty-two school systems responded to the survey. The findings include:

- **The level of activity varies greatly from school system to school system and from school to school within a system. However, most schools have very limited voter-registration/education programs.**

All the school systems surveyed reported at least some kind of school-based, student voter registration activity. But these vary widely, ranging from putting up posters to actual in-school registration. Most schools' voter registration activity is extremely limited, and is conducted casually and with little fanfare. Only six school systems reported keeping records of how many students are registered each year. Only seven provide incentives or public recognition in the form of contests and awards for successful registration efforts.

- **Voter registration in schools is typically dependent on the degree of interest of an individual principal or social studies teacher, rather than on a clearly formulated, system-wide program.**

In most of the school systems reporting, there was no school-system-wide voter registration/education program. Most school systems contacted had no special operating budget for voter registration and education materials.

- **In short, the largest public school systems, which account for approximately five million high-school students, do not generally appear to make voter registration a high priority.**

Case Study: A Success Story in Dade County, Florida

The People For the American Way survey also found that the public schools have the potential to do much more, and make a major contribution to reversing the decline in

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youth voting. The survey identified a remarkably successful voter registration and education program in the Dade County, Florida public school system, the fourth largest in the country. As Figure 5 indicates, more than 98 percent of all eligible students were registered to vote this year. In the 1987-88 school year, 20 Dade County high schools reported that every eligible student registered to vote. (Nationally, estimates are that well under 50 percent of 18-year-olds are registered.)

High School	Eligible Students	Number Registered	Percentage Registered
American	277	277	100
Coral Gables	470	470	100
Hialeah	309	309	100
Hialeah-Miami Lakes	569	569	100
Homestead	353	353	100
Miami Beach	372	372	100
Miami Carol City	279	279	100
Miami Central	319	319	100
Miami Coral Park	442	442	100
Miami Edison	144	144	100
Miami Jackson	286	286	100
Miami Killian	763	713	93.4
Miami Norland	399	399	100
Miami Northwestern	448	448	100
Miami Palmetto	558	545	97.7
Miami Senior	206	206	100
Miami Southridge	582	582	100
Miami Springs	291	291	100
Miami Sunset	643	643	100
New World School of the Arts	112	112	100
North Miami Beach	495	446	90.1
North Miami	609	574	94.3
South Dade	355	341	96.1
South Miami	364	364	100
Southwest Miami	510	510	100
Senior High Totals	10,155	9,994	98.4

Figure 5: Voters Registered in Dade County, Florida High Schools, 1988
Source: Dade County Schools

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According to the coordinator of the Dade County program, Paul Hansen, Director of General Education and Social Sciences, the current program evolved from earlier efforts, still common in many school systems, that featured election officials or nonpartisan registrars who "set up shop," usually in the school lobby, and spent several hours registering eligible students who wished to do so. These exercises, according to Hansen, did not result in significant numbers of registrations and eventually was replaced by the current system, which has several key components.

The first important step is that every social studies teacher at the high-school level is trained and deputized to register students, a procedure that takes about an hour. The training is usually coordinated by the social-studies department head, and conducted by the Dade County Elections Department.

In March, Hansen's office provides a computer printout to the social studies head at each high school. The printout includes all students who are eligible, listed both alphabetically and by social studies class so that each social studies teacher will be able to determine which students are eligible to register.

Each social studies head is responsible for organizing registration activities at his or her school, a process that swings into full gear in May, which the school board has designated Student Voter Registration Month. Department heads distribute both the printouts and voter registration forms to teachers who integrate the registration process into the daily social-studies curriculum. They return the completed forms to the department heads who, in turn, send them to the social-studies department in the district's central office where they are checked for completeness and delivered to the Elections Department.

At the end of the school year, all schools complete a detailed tally of voter registration, and the overall results are sent to the school board in the form of a report. Last fall at a board meeting, individual schools were cited for their successful work.

There have not yet been follow-up studies to determine voter turnout rates among recent Dade County high school graduates. Nonetheless, since registration is an especially big obstacle for young, first-time voters, this uniquely successful program is significant. According to Paul Hansen, the costs of operating the program are "minimal" and most other school systems have the capacity to generate lists of eligible students as Dade County does.

The People For the American Way survey found that the Nashville, Tennessee school system has also begun to use a computer printout of eligible students to organize an in-school program started in 1984. This spring, 1,429 students were registered through a system of faculty advisors and student teams who identify and encourage eligible fellow students to register.

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The survey also found a similar "Peer Registrar" program in Philadelphia, which included an essay and poster contest around the theme of voter participation. The program was responsible for registering at least 2,400 students this spring and culminated in a ceremony and awards program with the mayor at City Hall.

Recommendations

- **Successful high-school voter-registration programs, such as the one conducted by the Dade County, Florida high schools, should be adopted across the country.**

High schools are the best place to involve young adults in the electoral process before they slide into prolonged non-participation. Since voting is a basic responsibility of citizenship, high schools as institutions have a responsibility to dramatize the importance of voting—not merely by encouraging all eligible students to register before graduation, but by providing a system to facilitate registration. A highly visible, institutional commitment to voter registration would also send a message to young people that educators and the community at large truly value voter participation and active citizenship.

- **High-school voter registration must be part of a broader effort to stimulate student interest in citizen participation. This should include using texts and classroom materials that emphasize participation, and providing students opportunities for community-service experience.**

Schools should also encourage student participation in their local communities. The Maryland State Department of Education has assumed a leading role in promoting such programs, explaining in its mission statement that "it is time for us in education to re-dedicate ourselves ... to the quest to produce conscientious participants in our democracy, to make the virtues of citizenship a habit, and one of the most effective ways to do this is through a program of community service."

- **Voter registration and education should be targeted to disadvantaged and dropout youth as well.**

High schools are only part of the solution to the decline in youth voting. Most young people 18 to 24 are no longer in school of any kind. In particular, many poor young people drop out of high school, and have a very low rate of voter participation.

But these Americans should not simply be written off. For that reason People For the American Way, in collaboration with the National Youth Employment Coalition, a network of organizations working to train and counsel disadvantaged young people, has developed *First Vote*, a curriculum to encourage registration and voting. The curriculum consists of an Instructor's Guide to be used by NYEC staff to teach young people

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the importance of voting and how to register and vote. The Instructor's Guide was designed to be used in a variety of programs so that staff can incorporate the lessons on voting into their ongoing work with young people.

The goal of *First Vote* is to register every eligible young person who participates in an NYEC program. *First Vote* will be distributed in Fall, 1988 to some 6,000 NYEC-member programs across the country. It has the potential to add at least 600,000 "first voters" to the registration rolls each year.

The Role of the Business Community

Another institution that could play an important role in reviving voting is American business. Every American comes in daily contact with the business community. Businesses--large and small--then, are an ideal vehicle for promoting voter participation.

People For the American Way's study of business involvement focused on major corporations. To be sure, small businesses have a role to play in voter participation issues, but it is reasonable to expect large corporations to lead the way.

To assess the current level of activity among major corporations, and the role they might play in the future, People For the American Way conducted a study of the voter participation programs of American business. The study consisted of a survey of the top 100 companies of the Fortune 500, as well as in-depth discussions with nearly 50 corporate executives at a series of business roundtables in Los Angeles, Cleveland, and Minneapolis.

The study found:

- **The extent of nonpartisan corporate activity to promote voting varies widely, but fully 60 percent of those surveyed do very little or nothing at all.**

The 40 percent of corporations surveyed that do conduct voter activities sponsor a range of programs including distributing nonpartisan information on issues and candidates, inviting county election officials or a local nonpartisan organization like the League of Women Voters to register employees, distributing bulletins and posting flyers. These corporations conduct such programs on a regular and ongoing basis.

However, 60 percent either only conduct minimal activities, often done infrequently--reminder notices on bulletin boards, occasional articles in employee newsletters, or sporadic voter registration opportunities--or, in the case of a large number of corporations, nothing at all. Figure 6 shows a breakdown of the types of activities conducted by those 40 percent of corporations who do engage in meaningful voter participation programs.

- **Most corporate voter participation programs do not extend beyond the plant gate.**

Only six percent conduct programs that reach customers and citizens at large. While many corporations already have in place the tools of voter outreach, including distribution networks spanning the nation and regular advertising programs in the print and broadcast media, a very small percentage conducts voter outreach beyond their own employees.

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Corporations that supply the following:

deadline/registration information	78%	(28)
issue/candidate information	42%	(15)
registration forms	45%	(16)

Corporations that sponsor the following:

bulletins, newsletters, flyers	89%	(32)
promotional posters, buttons	75%	(27)
voter registration tables, or provide in-house deputy registrars	94%	(34)

(base: 36 corporations conducting voter registration activities,
from among 100 corporations surveyed)

Figure 6: Activities Conducted by Corporations Surveyed that Offer Voter Participation Programs

Obstacles to Corporate Involvement

The survey and roundtables identified four major obstacles to corporate involvement in voter participation activities.

With notable exceptions, voter participation programs have not been a traditional civic activity for large companies. In fact, the survey reveals that the reason cited most often for a company's lack of involvement is that voter participation was never--or at least not recently--placed on the agenda for consideration. In fact, more than half the corporations without a voter program gave this as the reason.

In interviews with several respondents, another obstacle to a successful program emerged: the failure of corporate leadership, despite initial assurances, to provide either symbolic support or the necessary resources. As a government relations executive at a consumer products company said, "Without support from senior management, we can't do much."

At two companies, voter participation programs proved too controversial--apparently some employees felt that management was injecting a partisan tone--and were dropped. Conversely, several participants at People For the American Way's roundtables expressed concern as to whether currently unregistered voters as a group would be hostile to corporate interests, and one middle-management executive went so far as to say that she was fairly certain that top management at her company would not support a campaign to register the unregistered, on the grounds that the majority of new registrants might not support the corporation's political positions. (According to a *New York*

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Times/CBS poll earlier this year, currently unregistered voters, when asked which party they prefer, are split nearly equally between Republican and Democratic.)

Finally, cost was sometimes mentioned as an obstacle, not so much in terms of additional expenditures but in staff time and competition with other priority programs.

Reasons for Corporate Involvement

The survey and roundtable discussions pinpointed three major reasons why corporations involve themselves in voter participation programs.

First, such programs sometimes fit into a wider marketing and public relations strategy. At Marathon Oil Company, for example, the company's slogan is "An American Company Serving America," and corporate officials clearly believe that a campaign to encourage voting reinforces their patriotic theme. The same reasoning prevails at Wal-Mart, where founder Sam Walton is well known for stocking his stores with American-produced goods. "There's nothing more pro-American than voting," Becky Elliott of Wal-Mart asserted, acknowledging that Wal-Mart's in-store registration campaign may bring in some additional customers, although this was apparently not a primary reason the company supports voter-registration activities.

Second, voter-participation programs are often developed because one or more high ranking executive believes that voting is important, or is concerned about the low level of participation. At Hallmark, for example, the company's chairman, Donald Hall, has not only made voter-participation programs a priority within the company but has spoken out in favor of greater business leadership in this area generally. "The business community has many opportunities to take the lead in support of the political process. Not only can we encourage employees to participate ... [but] we can, by personal example and by corporate policy, demonstrate the value we place on voter registration and voting." Many roundtable participants stressed the importance of top management support in getting a new voter participation program off the ground.

Finally, voter education is sometimes seen as a way to advocate specific corporate interests. A small number of major corporations have voluntary but well developed grassroots programs aimed at stimulating employees to get involved in the political process, including contacting legislators on selected issues. Arco has been a leader in this area. Last year Arco employees throughout the country held 200 box-lunch forums that featured speakers on a variety of topics. As a recent *Los Angeles Times* article noted, Arco and other companies "are encouraging thousands of their employees to eat with, listen to, campaign for, write and generally befriend their elected officials."

In order to promote the corporate community's ideological interests generally, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and other groups encourage businesses to work to increase the number of "pro-business" voters. However, there was only limited evidence in People For the American Way's survey or business roundtables to indicate that this was a

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significant motivation for existing voter programs. To be sure, there is some degree of corporate concern about the possibility of registering new voters who may be hostile to corporate interests, but People For the American Way's research indicated that there were other more important factors involved in the development of voter programs.

Corporate Models

There are essentially three types of nonpartisan voter participation programs that corporations can conduct: voter registration, get-out-the-vote, and voter education. Corporations can target two potential audiences for their activities: their employees and customers and the community at large.

According to People For the American Way's survey and roundtables, voter education is less common than voter registration and get-out-the-vote activities for two reasons. First, there is the matter of cost and staff time involved in arranging for speakers, scheduling forums, and researching and printing educational materials. Second, some concern exists among corporate managers that employees might perceive "voter education" as partisan and, therefore, as a potentially divisive factor.

Nevertheless, the research turned up innovative programs by corporations employing each method, and targeted at each audience. Following are some brief examples.

Hallmark Cards, Inc.: Registering and Educating Employees

Hallmark Cards, Inc., based in Kansas City, Missouri, has one of the best developed programs for employee registration. The corporation has developed kits—including a 38-page step-by-step handbook and videotape—for organizing a voter participation program. In addition to use by Hallmark, the kits are made available to other corporations.

The corporation conducts on-site registration of its employees and a 12-week get-out-the-vote campaign, run by a volunteer committee of employees. The program is designed to stimulate interest in voting by, among other activities, staging educational events such as candidate debates and issue forums, and gives detailed, hands-on information on how to organize registration activities.

Ameritrust: Register at the Bank

Only four of the top 100 companies surveyed—Phillip Morris, General Dynamics, General Mills, and Tenneco—reported programs designed for an external audience. Phillip Morris, for example, is working on an outreach program with Hispanic leaders, and General Dynamics has run ads in national publications stressing the importance of voting.

Still, community-oriented registration programs have been successful in a number of places recently. At People For the American Way's Cleveland roundtable, Ameritrust

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Figure 7: Sample Voting Materials: Marathon Oil and Wal-Mart

Vice President Bruce Akers reported that in the past five years more people have been registered to vote in 90 of Ameritrust's branch bank offices, where employees have been trained as deputy registrars, than in any other nongovernmental agency in the Cleveland area. Mr. Akers calls the program, which is carried out at little cost, "a wonderful success."

Wal-Mart: Register while Shopping

Much the same is true of the ambitious voter registration campaign sponsored by Wal-Mart this spring in cooperation with the League of Women Voters. Scheduled before registration closed in 12 "Super Tuesday" primary states in the South and Southwest, more than 700 Wal-Mart stores, many located in small towns serving rural areas, were turned into registration sites with the League of Women Voters providing the staffing.

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Wal-Mart publicized the two-day campaign by running advertisements in local newspapers, and distributing brochures and posters. In all, about 80,000 people were registered and, according to Becky Elliott of Wal-Mart, the campaign was so successful that Wal-Mart conducted a similar effort on September 9-10. (Figure 7)

Marathon Oil: Register when Paying Bills

Ohio-based Marathon Oil unveiled a new voter-registration program this summer that sought to reach its customers in two ways. According to Jim Wilkins, the company's director of state government affairs, Marathon included a voter registration form in the monthly billing it sent to 100,000 Ohio credit-card holders who, in turn, sent the completed form back to Marathon in the same return envelope they used to pay their bill. Marathon forwarded all the completed forms to the Ohio Secretary of State's office, more than 5,000 in all. In addition, Marathon provided the Ohio mail-in registration forms to all 860 of its Ohio service stations for distribution to customers, spotlighting this part of the program with radio ads and brightly colored pump-toppers urging customers to register to vote. Although Marathon picked up the cost of printing the registration forms, according to Mr. Wilkins the cost of the program "was negligible." The radio ads, for example, were run during air time Marathon budgeted for its regular corporate advertising. (Figure 7)

Recommendations

Based on its research, People For the American Way offers the following recommendations to the business community.

- **Most major corporations have not yet placed voter participation high on their civic agenda--and many corporations do not have it on their agenda at all. Top corporate management should make solving the voting crisis a priority.**
- **Existing business-school partnership programs should address the non-voting problem and business should consider supplying technical expertise and other resources to help school systems implement voter registration programs like the one in Dade County, Florida.**

In recent years, business has become actively involved in school-partnership programs because of the crisis in education, and the shockingly high dropout rate. That involvement could easily include efforts to address the lack of citizen participation by young people.

- **More public officials and top corporate management should work together to promote voter participation, both at the workplace and in the larger community.**

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Nonpartisan workplace voter registration and education programs ought to be viewed in much the same way that agency-based registration programs are: as a method for lowering barriers to participation and stimulating interest in civic life.

- **Beyond the fall election, corporate leaders should convene their own roundtable to plan a strategy for reversing the decline in voting by the 1992 election or sooner. Although there are a number of model corporate programs, what is needed is a critical mass of activity that would also stimulate related endeavors by schools, civic groups, and other institutions. Special attention should be given to inspiring and involving young workers and students who make up a substantial percentage of the non-participants.**

At People For the American Way's Minneapolis roundtable, one executive said at the conclusion of the meeting: "This discussion served to raise my consciousness of the problem and to the fact that we could make a difference." The challenge is for business, together with other institutions, to assume a leadership role where the goal is nothing less than the revitalization of American democracy.

Community-based Activist Groups

It is no coincidence that the decline in voter participation parallels the decline of traditional mediating institutions, including the local political parties and labor unions that in an earlier era recruited and mobilized millions of citizens to register and vote.

Two centuries ago Edmund Burke wrote that, "To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections."

Increasingly, however, contemporary American social critics and activists, ranging across the political spectrum, have lamented the weakening, even demise, of our little platoons and with it a growing disaffection from public life. In a mass, anonymous urban society, the tendency toward feelings of isolation, indifference, and powerlessness is heightened when voluntary associations or mediating structures atrophy or disappear.

But in some inner city areas, there are neighborhood leaders who understand that strengthening and rebuilding mediating institutions is a key to revitalizing citizen participation and democracy itself, and their work deserves national attention. "The need for effective, powerful mediating institutions such as churches, synagogues, schools, ethnic and neighborhood associations and unions is greater than ever before," reads a mission statement developed by leaders of three Los Angeles-area grassroots organizations.

Recently, People For the American Way met with citizen leaders of the Los-Angeles-based United Neighborhoods Organization (UNO), South Central Organizing Committee (SCOC), and East Valley's Organization (EVO) to hear first-hand about plans for their voter and citizenship participation project that now, less than a month before the election, is in full gear. Comprised of poor and working class whites, blacks, and Hispanics, these multi-issue, church-based community organizations are part of a growing network of 17 community organizations located mainly in cities in California, Texas, and New York, and associated with the late Saul Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF).

The stark portrait these leaders sketch of a crumbling social and political infrastructure in many U.S. cities casts in sharp relief the contradiction between democratic aspirations and current realities. In their words, "Only half of the population votes, and the chasm between the haves and have-nots is growing larger. Homelessness, disease, and hunger now spread across the U.S. landscape. Our families are under assault. Divorce has doubled in 15 years. The drug crisis is epidemic and corrupting entire communities." Not unrelated, as these leaders note, is the weakening role in many communities of familiar mediating institutions. "Mainline churches," they write, "have been on the ropes for more than a decade. Membership in unions is at an all-time low and spiraling downward."

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It is against this backdrop that the three Los Angeles groups, together with other IAF-related organizations, have been developing "A Strategy for Reviving Mediating Institutions" so that ordinary people can have a real voice in policy decisions that affect their lives. "The practice of politics is fundamental to a healthy democracy and participation in public life is a right and an obligation," the mission statement says. "Broad-based organizations, comprised of churches, synagogues, and unions, offer the most effective instrument for sustained participation and ongoing adult education."

"Sign Up ... Take Charge"

It is one thing, however, to articulate such a vision, and quite another to implement it. Thus, it is all the more impressive in this election year, when signs of apathy are scattered across the American landscape, that the leaders and members of UNO, SCOC, and EVO are engaged in a concerted effort to assure that issues important to children, families, and neighborhoods in Southern California are made part of the public discussion--and ultimately, are acted upon by elected officials.

Their rallying cry is "Sign Up ... Take Charge," a campaign fueled by a healthy mixture of anger, determination, and faith in the democratic process; a campaign to collect 200,000 signatures on petitions in support of issues that people have decided are their priorities; a campaign to identify and turn out 100,000 new and occasional voters on November 8 who support these issues. (Figure 8) In Los Angeles, the community organizations have formed a partnership with several labor unions that will help with the fall campaign.

Sign up... Take Charge!

Esta es nuestra **Agenda** para reedificar nuestras comunidades. Es el producto de discusiones con 10,500 familias en reuniones en todo el condado de Los Angeles y será usada para negociar con los oficiales elegidos y los líderes de Corporaciones.

Su firma le dá el poder a esta **Agenda**

NOSOTROS APOYAMOS:

CRIMEN • Reducir la delincuencia y el crimen violento. • Reducir la delincuencia y el crimen violento. • Reducir la delincuencia y el crimen violento. VIVIENDA • Reducir la delincuencia y el crimen violento. • Reducir la delincuencia y el crimen violento. • Reducir la delincuencia y el crimen violento. CUIDADO DE SALUD • Reducir la delincuencia y el crimen violento. • Reducir la delincuencia y el crimen violento. • Reducir la delincuencia y el crimen violento.	EDUCACION • Reducir la delincuencia y el crimen violento. • Reducir la delincuencia y el crimen violento. • Reducir la delincuencia y el crimen violento. CUIDADO INFANTE • Reducir la delincuencia y el crimen violento. • Reducir la delincuencia y el crimen violento. • Reducir la delincuencia y el crimen violento.	TRABAJO CON JUSTICIA • Reducir la delincuencia y el crimen violento. • Reducir la delincuencia y el crimen violento. • Reducir la delincuencia y el crimen violento. SEGURIDAD AUTOMOVILES • Reducir la delincuencia y el crimen violento. • Reducir la delincuencia y el crimen violento. • Reducir la delincuencia y el crimen violento. MEIO AMBIENTE • Reducir la delincuencia y el crimen violento. • Reducir la delincuencia y el crimen violento. • Reducir la delincuencia y el crimen violento. INMIGRACION • Reducir la delincuencia y el crimen violento. • Reducir la delincuencia y el crimen violento. • Reducir la delincuencia y el crimen violento.
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Figure 8: Spanish Version of the "Sign Up ... Take Charge" Petition Campaign in Los Angeles

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The campaign is not restricted to the *barrio*, the ghetto, and the San Gabriel Valley of Los Angeles County. In South Texas, Valley Interfaith, an IAF-spawned community organization of 37 largely Mexican-American Roman Catholic parishes, has been conducting its own version of "Sign Up ... Take Charge" for the past six months. From Brownsville up the Rio Grande River to La Joya, an area that spans the poorest counties in the U.S., more than 350 Valley Interfaith members have been ringing doorbells, talking to their neighbors and getting petitions signed in support of issues important to them such as flood control, jobs, and health care. Using their evenings and weekends, the volunteers have been registering voters and have already collected 30,000 signatures in support of their issue agenda.

In New York, the "Sign Up ... Take Charge" campaign is flourishing in two areas that not long ago were national symbols of urban decline and decay, the South Bronx and East Brooklyn. The two community organizations there, the South Bronx Organizing Committee and East Brooklyn Churches, together with a sister organization in Queens, have already collected more than 200,000 signatures on their petitions and are targeting a voter-registration drive in precincts where interest in the petition drive is especially high.

The Making of Citizens

While the product of these campaigns—the tens of thousands of signatures and the newly registered voters—is readily impressive, it is the process that is even more important. This is not a conventional, one-shot voter registration/get-out-the-vote effort, as useful as those endeavors can be. Rather, developing the campaign has been a hands-on learning experience for hundreds of people. It began when citizen leaders of each organization first researched, discussed, and debated issues among themselves, then made recommendations that were scrutinized by review committees from each congregation or parish before the general membership approved a final agenda. It was a process that required scores of people to become knowledgeable about a range of policy choices having to do with toxic-waste management, crime control, automobile-insurance rates, economic development and many others.

The process also required mapping plans for a large precinct operation—in Los Angeles the door-to-door petition drive covers more than 600 precincts, requiring an unprecedented number of volunteers and coordination. These demands forced the organizations' staff and citizen leaders to reach out for new participants, which in itself is producing rewards. For many, this has been citizenship and leadership training of the best kind. "People only grow and develop if they have specific responsibilities to carry out," one of UNO's leaders says, adding that new people assuming new responsibilities also helps strengthen the organization. Before the neighborhood walks began, 600 volunteers attended training sessions one night a week for three weeks, learning how to lead precinct teams and teach other volunteers to explain the campaign's goals and issues when they go door-to-door, a new, challenging role for many.

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From Image to Issues

On the surface, it may seem like something of an anomaly that voter participation in the United States has declined during a period when increasingly vast sums of money have been spent by candidates to engage the interest of voters. But to the community organizers and citizen leaders of these community organizations, modern media-dominated politics is part of the problem. As Michael Gecan, a senior IAF organizer in New York, says, "Elections here are media wars and contests between personalities; campaigns consciously avoid issues of substance that touch the real, daily lives of people."

And in the *colonias* of South Texas, where safe drinking water and basic survival are daily concerns, people will not vote merely out of a sense of civic duty, says Valley Interfaith organizer Christine Stephens, who also stressed the irrelevancy of so many political campaigns. "Our people want to hear somebody speak to their interests and needs before they'll give them their vote."

Thus, a primary purpose of the "Sign Up ... Take Charge" campaign is to force a public discussion on issues that really matter to people—and to demonstrate to elected officials, candidates, and the media that these issues have a large constituency.

Building mediating structures that have the capacities to shape the public dialogue is no easy, quick task. Indeed, several of the community organizations mentioned here are more than a decade old. At their best, they are honeycombs of collective leadership, painstakingly put together through endless one-to-one discussions and house meetings, neighborhood forums and downtown "actions," and annual conventions where officers and programs are democratically chosen. Highly skilled community organizers have been a key part of the process, serving not only as strategists but as educators in the arts and skills of debate and discussion, compromise, negotiation, running a meeting—the basic tools of democracy that are often missing from school civics courses. But when all is said and done, there is no mystery to what is fundamentally required—a belief by a group of people that by working together they can make a difference to improve the quality of life for their families and communities.

In Baltimore, members of a predominately black community organization called Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development (BUILD), another IAF-related group, have learned they can make a difference in shaping the city's priorities. They had fashioned their own "agenda for the city"—proposals that included the creation of 1,000 low-income homeowners modeled after the Nehemiah program in East Brooklyn; the reduction of class sizes to 25 students by 1990; a jobs program, and several others. But in 1986, when the agenda was announced, the governor-elect of Maryland bluntly told a BUILD convention that their plan was wildly unrealistic. By the following year, however, much had changed, as reported in the *The Baltimore Evening Sun*. "In a year, the agenda and BUILD have gone from being seen as unrealistic bystanders in city politics to central players. BUILD gained that stature by collecting 75,000 signatures on petitions

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supporting its agenda and then asking citywide candidates in this year's elections to endorse the plan."

All did, including the newly elected Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke, who told BUILD's 1987 convention that "The BUILD agenda is really the city's agenda." For BUILD, it was a high-water mark and a major achievement--and it was also a crystal clear example of how grassroots citizen participation and a mediating institution can make an impact on the electoral process and influence the public dialogue.

Recommendations

- **Despite the extraordinary number of people involved and the importance of the issues being raised, there has been limited media coverage of the "Sign Up ... Take Charge" campaign. Mediating institutions clearly could have an important role to play in reversing the decline in voting and stimulating citizen participation generally. Increased media attention is one important way to validate and legitimize these groups, their leaders, and the issues they raise.**
- **Foundations and others concerned about the decline in voting and citizen participation should be more prepared to nurture groups that are dedicated to democratic values and prepared to raise important issues that are not yet part of a prevailing consensus.**

The mediating institutions taking part in the "Sign Up ... Take Charge" campaign are dues-based organizations that generally raise their own funds for programs, but for this ambitious effort have received additional financial support from the nonpartisan Forum Institute, several labor unions, and others. All too often, however, nonpartisan mediating institutions that raise controversial issues and try to influence the electoral process find it very difficult to attain funding help.

- **The basic role of mediating institutions in a democratic society should receive greater attention in high school and college civics and government courses.**

The decline in voting--which implies a decline in other kinds of citizen participation--suggests that many Americans do not have a well-developed understanding of the obligations and responsibilities of citizenship generally and, specifically, of the importance of "the little platoons" as the building blocks of civic life.

THE ROAD AHEAD

As the November election draws near, the newspaper headlines report the likelihood of a close race between the two major party presidential candidates, a contest that could be decided by a percentage point or two, or even by a vote or two per precinct as was the case in 1960. This is an election in which each vote could literally make a crucial difference. But behind the headlines, there is another story—one that suggests indifference and apathy are winning out. There is a strong possibility this year, as in 1984, that a greater number of eligible voters will stay at home than will vote for the next President of the United States.

Democracy is not a spectator sport. Thus the continuing decline in voting and citizen participation generally is cause for great concern. This study has highlighted several models and courses of action that could be part of a new national debate and discussion on the urgent need to revitalize democratic institutions and the democratic process. While voter registration reform legislation is one of the critical, first steps to encourage citizen participation, as a nation we must renew our educational efforts especially among youth, who too often are not exposed to the fundamental concepts of democracy and the dynamic, inspiring story of the great American experiment in self-government.

As de Tocqueville observed, citizen participation is the cornerstone of the democratic process. "The health of a democratic society may be measured by the quality of functions performed by private citizens," he wrote. There must be a renewed understanding of the duties of citizenship and the simple yet profound idea that American democracy can only work if most people work at it—that the price of democracy is the daily, active involvement of an informed citizenry, and that voting is only the first duty of democracy.

METHODOLOGY

This study, part of People For the American Way's Voter/Citizen Participation Project, is the product of original research by People For the American Way, as well as analysis of the considerable body of literature on voting behavior.

To learn more about the reasons why young people don't vote, People For the American Way sponsored three focus groups with 18- to 24-year-old non-voters, both whites and minorities. Each session lasted about two hours. The focus groups were conducted in Baltimore and Prince Georges County, Maryland, by Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc.

To better understand the role of schools in voter education, People For the American Way surveyed the 44 largest public school systems in the country. Thirty-two responded. People For the American Way supplemented the survey with phone and in-person interviews with teachers and high school administrators around the country.

People For the American Way also took a close look at the role American business is playing and could play in encouraging voter participation. Phone and mail surveys were conducted with the top 100 Fortune 500 corporations in April and May, 1988. The survey questionnaire focused on voter registration, voter education, and get-out-the-vote activities, the key elements of a nonpartisan program. Ninety-one interviews were completed.

In addition, in-depth roundtable discussions with nearly 50 corporate executives were conducted in Los Angeles, Cleveland, and Minneapolis in June and July, 1988 to follow-up on the initial findings of the telephone surveys and to probe motivations for and barriers to corporate voter participation programs.

Interviews and discussions were conducted with Members of Congress and their staffs, local and state election officials, and community organizers and other activists who are currently engaged in voter registration and participation programs.